

SUNRISE VISIONARY

BY GREGORY ENNS

R.N. 'Pop' Koblegard's dream for a grand theater in his adopted hometown came true exactly a century ago

When the 1,300-seat Sunrise Theatre opened in downtown Fort Pierce exactly a century ago, the city had a population of just 2,000 people. The theater's size meant that it was big enough to fit the town's entire population, with more than half being seated.

Today, as the Sunrise prepares to celebrate the centennial of its opening on Aug. 1, 1923, the theater stands as a testament to the vision of its founder, R.N. "Pop" Koblegard. While Koblegard's name is a familiar one and his descendants are plentiful on the Treasure Coast, just who exactly was Pop Koblegard and why did he build the Sunrise on such a grand scale?

Rupert Neis Koblegard was born in 1878 in West Union, West Virginia, the son of Isophene and Jacob Koblegard, an emigrant from Copenhagen, Denmark.

Jacob had prospered in his adopted homeland and was considered a pioneer in the development of central West Virginia. Starting with a wholesale grocery business, he also became president of the local bank and president of the Crescent Glass Factory in Weston, West Virginia. He also held interests in a dry goods store, hardware store and mill, all in Clarksburg, West Virginia.

Jacob Koblegard had begun the business with his brother, John, and business partner John Ruhl in the 1870s selling produce in a stable in downtown Clarksburg. It became known as the Ruhl-Koblegard Co. Before chain grocery stores became dominant in the mid-20th century, most grocery stores were owned by entrepreneurs who relied on wholesalers like the Ruhl-Koblegard Co. to supply their goods.

Rupert would follow his father into the wholesale grocery business after attending Wittenberg College in Springfield, Ohio, and, at the age of 19, marrying Rose May Butt of Springfield.

Rupert earned the nickname Pop not in his later years as a doting grandfather but as a young man. "He was at a celebration, whether a birthday or New Year's Eve, and he was in charge of opening champagne bottles and he started popping tops off and somebody decided to name him Pop," said his granddaughter, Mary Ann Koblegard Bryan of Fort Pierce, who has extensively researched Koblegard family history.

While the nickname reflected his fun-loving



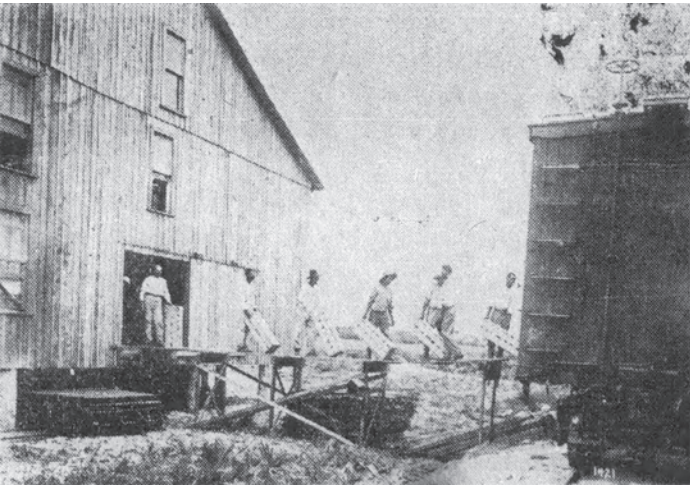
HISTORICAL PHOTOS PROVIDED BY KOBLEGARD FAMILY

R.N. 'Pop' Koblegard arrived in Fort Pierce from West Virginia in 1906 and became the town's biggest developer and promoter in its early years. In 1922, he unveiled plans for the 1,300-seat Sunrise Theatre and completed it a year later.

spirit among his friends, on the exterior he was a hard-driven businessman adept at bringing people together to invest in the ideas he championed. He dreamed big and possessed the ability to adapt to almost any situation. He used any setback as an opportunity for the advancement of himself or his projects. He was also an expert promoter, getting his name and his projects in newspapers, the major medium of his day, as much as possible.

When Ruhl-Koblegard Co. was sold in 1905 to the newly formed General Distributing Co., Koblegard went to work for the new company. The company's general manager was Frank Armstrong of Clarksburg, with whom Koblegard would be a close business associate for the next two decades.

Besides his work in the wholesale grocery business, Koblegard >>



This photo of the Koblegard packinghouse, where pineapples were prepared for shipping, appeared in the *Fort Pierce News* in 1914.

served on the board of the Home Bank for Savings in Clarksburg. Like his father, he also had outside investments and in 1906 the *Daily Telegram* in Clarksburg reported that an oil well in which he was the sole investor in Tulsa, then Indian Territory, was producing 200 barrels a day. Newspaper accounts would go on to record at least seven more producers for Koblegard, who went into his sideline oil-drilling business with his brother-in-law, E.R. Minshall.

ARRIVAL IN FORT PIERCE

Koblegard first visited Fort Pierce in 1906. A November blurb in the *St. Lucie County Tribune* that year said Jacob Koblegard and his wife and two of their sons had “joined the West Virginia colony at St. Lucie,” a reference to the community now known as St. Lucie Village on Old Dixie Highway, north of Fort Pierce. But the blurb apparently misidentified R.N., saying “J.N. Koblegard will join the above party about the first of December.” No J.N. Koblegard existed.

In an interview in 1914, Koblegard told a reporter that he had come to St. Lucie County for the health of his son. Koblegard had two sons, Ruhl, named after Jacob Koblegard’s business partner and born in 1900, and Rupert Koblegard Jr., born in 1903.

Mary Ann Bryan, Koblegard’s granddaughter, said the ailing brother was her father, Rupert Jr.

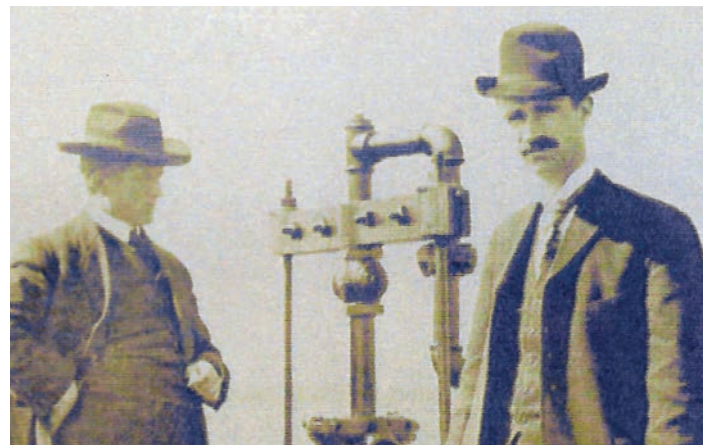
In the years before the Koblegards arrived in Fort Pierce, Mary Ann Bryan said the family had visited other places in northeast Florida such as St. Augustine and Daytona Beach.

The Koblegards returned to St. Lucie County from West Virginia in 1907, with the local *St. Lucie County Tribune* reporting the comings and goings of various Koblegard relatives. One notice included the announcement Sept. 13 that boat-builder R.R. Gladwin was constructing a “splendid 25-foot cabin launch for R.N. Koblegard.” A few weeks later, on Oct. 11, the newspaper, in a story recording new construction, reported that “the Koblegard bungalow, one of the finest in the country, will be ready for occupancy about the 20th.”

By 1909, Rupert Koblegard had formed Koblegard Plantations in the north St. Lucie County community of Viking and persuaded his friend Armstrong to invest with him. The growing of pineapples in this part of Florida began in the 1880s, flourishing in the region’s sandy soil. By the 1890s, the region had become the world’s largest exporter



Pineapples were Fort Pierce’s biggest crop in the 1880s and a decade later the region became the world’s largest exporter of pineapples.



R.N. ‘Pop’ Koblegard, right, invested in Oklahoma oil wells with his brother-in-law E.R. Minshall, left. They were partners in the construction of the Sunrise Theatre after asking city fathers what they should do with recent oil profits.



In his first days in Fort Pierce, R.N. Koblegard commissioned R.R. Gladwin in 1907 to build a “splendid cabin launch.” Pictured here, about 1910, on the Indian River are R.N. and wife, Rose May, and sons, Rupert Jr. and Ruhl, aboard *Rose*.

of pineapples, helped in part by Henry Flagler’s extension of the Florida East Coast Railroad down the coast. Rupert Koblegard built a two-story packinghouse the same year he started the company and a short-line rail running west from the FEC tracks to Indrio.

Before the St. Lucie investment, Armstrong just a year earlier had co-founded the Board, Armstrong Co., whose National Fruit Products Co. manufactured what would become famous as White House vinegar. It was a company in which Rupert Koblegard also held a financial interest, according to >>

his obituary, though family members say they do not know how much of the company he owned.

Located on the West Bank of the Potomac River, the company's plant had a clear view of the White House, which is how the label got its name. The company also boasted that President Theodore Roosevelt, a health and fitness advocate, had the vinegar delivered by horse-drawn carriage to him at the White House.

The success of White House vinegar was due largely to the innovation of packaging the vinegar in glass bottles so that the customer could see the clarity of the product. Previously, vinegar had been dispensed out of a barrel.

FORT PIERCE FARMS

Meanwhile in Florida, nematodes, spider mites and cheap imports from Cuba, along with a freeze, threatened Koblegard's and Armstrong's investment in pineapple growing.

The setbacks prompted them to pivot from concentrating solely on growing pineapples to developing land, and by 1910 Koblegard had laid out a vision for Fort Pierce Farms, a sprawling development of some 36,000 acres that ran north of modern-day St. Lucie Boulevard and west of the interstate highway east to the Indian River and north to the county line.

In 1911, with Armstrong, Koblegard chartered the Armstrong and Koblegard Co., whose stated goal was to purchase and develop land. Koblegard hatched the idea for the development a full decade before the Florida land boom of the 1920s.

Fort Pierce Farms was marketed by its real estate company, East Coast Realty. It touted 40-acre farms with rich fertile soil, a stretch since most of the property was on land that had

once been sandy ocean bottom. A 1913 article described Fort Pierce Farms as "mostly prairie, with some fine pine land and small hammocks along the edges." The article reported that the land was selling from \$40 to \$60 an acre.

Newspaper accounts also reported that by 1914 Koblegard and Armstrong's company had sold 239 40-acre farms and had built 33 miles of canals and 25 miles of hard-surfaced roads.

Koblegard and Armstrong had many other joint interests together, including the ownership of five canning factories in Virginia and West Virginia, where the White House line of vinegars, canned apples, apple sauce and apple butter were packaged, according to a 1922 article in the *Fort Pierce News-Tribune*.

Meanwhile, the company that was once Koblegard Plantations remained a going concern and it was reported that the crop of 1913, which amounted to more than 37,000 crates of pineapples, sold for \$60,000 or about \$1.8 million in today's dollars. The company, which changed its name to Seminole Fruit Co. in 1914, also began developing a 640-acre citrus grove.

MASTER PROMOTER

Koblegard was masterful at getting his name in newspapers. In the first decades of the 20th century, newspapers were full of brief notices — sometimes only a sentence or two — about what various citizens were doing, much like social media today. Read one typical notice of 1911 in the *Fort Pierce News*: "Messrs. R.N. Koblegard and Frank Armstrong arrived Wednesday morning here in the interest of the Fort Pierce Farms."

In the days before the universal use of telephones, getting the notices generally required dropping into the local newspaper office with a personal update and ingratiating oneself to the editor. Getting the notices became much easier as the >>

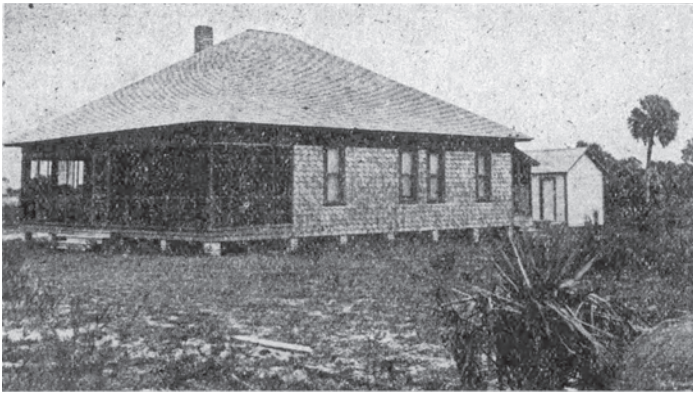
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This house was described as 'the Koblegard bungalow,' in a 1914 *Fort Pierce Tribune* item. The house was apparently one of the first R.N. Koblegard and family lived in while wintering in St. Lucie County.

use of the telephone became more widespread.

Sometimes, a mover or shaker like Koblegard scooping out tidbits to news-starved reporters might be able to use the newspaper to float a trial balloon, like the story Koblegard put out in 1922 that said the idea of creating a cannery to can grapefruit was under serious consideration. Luckily for Koblegard, it was an idea that never got off the ground.

In the 1910s, with his Florida properties well underway, Koblegard and his family lived in Washington, D.C., where he was president of East Coast Realty and also attending to other business interests he had with fellow Washingtonian Armstrong. When Armstrong retired from National Fruit Products Co. in 1919, Koblegard became president of the privately held corporation.

During the last half of the 1910s, the Koblegard family's visits to Fort Pierce became far less frequent, with one 1916 newspaper notice even saying that they had "formerly spent each winter" in St. Lucie.

Still, the occasional visits were met with great fanfare. One 1917 article reported that Koblegard had arrived on an early morning train bringing people from New York, Oklahoma and Pennsylvania as prospects to purchase tracts at Fort Pierce Farms, with the guests staying at the recently opened New Fort Pierce Hotel.

Bryan said her grandfather's diaries revealed that he spent much of his time on trains, traveling to various business appointments, often with his brother, Thorne, at his side.

"He was a deal maker, and he was successful in a lot of ventures," she said. "He was very work-oriented, although you wouldn't know that from being with him."

One of those fellow West Virginians Koblegard lured to Fort Pierce was W.S. Hoskins, a fellow oil investor and his neighbor in Weston, West Virginia. Hoskins became an officer in Fort Pierce Farms with Koblegard and built a house in 1908 at 2929 N. Indian River Drive in St. Lucie Village, still standing and owned by his great grandson, Fort Pierce lawyer Steve Hoskins. Frank Armstrong built a home next door, which Hoskins also now owns.

Hoskins said his great grandfather developed a process for extracting carbon black, which was used by the Binney Smith Company, to make Crayola crayons. W.S. Hoskins knew Crayola inventor Edwin Binney and told him about Fort Pierce, where Binney eventually built his home on Indrio Road called Florindia, Hoskins said. Binney was one of Fort Pierce's leading philanthropists, opening the Fort Pierce Inlet in 1921, creating the Port of Fort Pierce and saving the St.



The Air Dome, an outdoor theater, opened in 1916 and closed shortly after the opening of the Sunrise.

Lucie County Bank from closing in 1929.

Hoskins said other West Virginians with Koblegard connections who made Fort Pierce their permanent home include the Peed, Goff and Gates families. "The Koblegars were ambassadors for St. Lucie County," Hoskins said.

A THEATER IS BORN

Koblegard's interest in St. Lucie County returned with a vengeance in the early 1920s as the Florida land boom took off. As Fort Pierce's biggest dreamer and doer, Koblegard approached the city council, as it was then known, and asked what he should do with profits he had recently made in his oil investments. Their answer was instant: "A theater."

The city's only indoor theater, the 580-seat Crystal, which opened in 1909, replacing the city's first cinema, the Electric Theatre that opened in 1908, had closed in 1921. Both the Electric and Crystal were in what is now the Rosslow-Murphy building, still standing at Second Street and Orange Avenue. The closing of the Crystal left the city with only an outdoor theater called the Air Dome, located near the present site of the Sailfish Brewing Co. on Second Street, and which had been open since 1916.

Koblegard said he had been considering construction of the theater for two years and, in part, was prompted to begin construction with the opening of the Fort Pierce Inlet in 1921, creating a link between the Atlantic and the Indian River and hopes that Fort Pierce would become a global port.

In July 1922, Koblegard announced that he and brother-in-law, E.R. Minshall, his partner in the oil wells, had purchased the land to build the theater.

The two-story theater was to cost \$150,000, approximately \$2.6 million in today's dollars. With Koblegard directing architect John N. Sherwood to design one that could accommodate 1,300 people, it would be grander than anything in Fort Pierce. The building would include six storefronts, the lobby and auditorium on the ground floor and a balcony and offices on the second floor.

"He feels certain that the opportune time for such a building has arrived and he is expecting to erect such a building as will be a landmark in architectural beauty and the pride of all citizens," the *Fort Pierce News-Tribune* reported. Undoubtedly, the business-savvy Koblegard was also caught up in the heady days of the Florida land boom and believed that the population would grow exponentially, soon filling his theater.

When Koblegard went back to the city council to show his plans, a councilman told him, "We want a theater but we >>

don't want you to go broke. You're building a theater with nearly as many seats as there are people."

Koblegard's response? "Better too large than too small."

PREPARING FOR OPENING DAY

The theater, named the Sunrise to match Fort Pierce's recently acquired nickname as The Sunrise City, was constructed in Mediterranean revival style with barrel tile on the roof. Walls were covered in gold fabric and others in stencil. A Mediterranean-style drinking fountain was the centerpiece of the lobby.

The theater, the largest between Jacksonville and Miami, sported the highest and best quality, from carpeting on the floor and comfortable individual chairs with leather seats to Typhoon cooling fans and a Fotoplayer organ.

Crowds filled the theater on opening day, Aug. 1, 1923, with the rapt audience hearing speeches from various dignitaries, singing by soloist Mrs. John Dunn, and the playing of tunes by the Fort Pierce Band before the showing of a double silent movie bill, *The Famous Mrs. Fair* with Myrtle Stedman and *The Vagabond* with Charlie Chaplin.

Since the theater arrived during the wane of vaudeville and the ascendancy of films, it was built both to accommodate movies and live acts.

But in the initial weeks of opening, it was clear from newspaper notices and advertisements that the theater was having trouble with attendance. The reason?

Harry Sample, the manager of the Air Dome down the street and former manager of the Crystal, was booking the best shows, having developed influential contacts through his years in the industry. The solution? Koblegard removed the Sunrise's initial management company and replaced it with Sample's.

Sample made the Sunrise a success, coming up with giveaways and special programs and inventive ways to lure people into the theater. He gave boat builder George Backus a lifetime pass to the theater because of his infectious laugh. "Harry said Pa saw the funny side of things before anyone else did," said George's son, A.E. "Bean" Backus, who would become the dean of Florida landscape painters, in a 1983 interview.

The hiring of Sample and the gaining popularity of the Sunrise resulted in the Air Dome closing a few months after Sample took over.

Talkies arrived at the Sunrise in 1928, with the first movie with sound, *Street Angel*, starring Janet Gaynor, airing.

Sample left the Sunrise and on Oct. 29, 1928, opened his own theater, the Ritz, on Second Street. When the R and the Z fell from the Ritz marquee shortly after it went up, it became known as The It, a change Sample wholeheartedly embraced and marketed. Meanwhile, Koblegard's son, Rupert Jr., took over management of the Sunrise.

RIDING THE BOOM

During the land boom of the 1920s, Koblegard had begun living full time in Fort Pierce, setting up Koblegard Real Estate and capitalizing on the heady days of the Florida land boom.

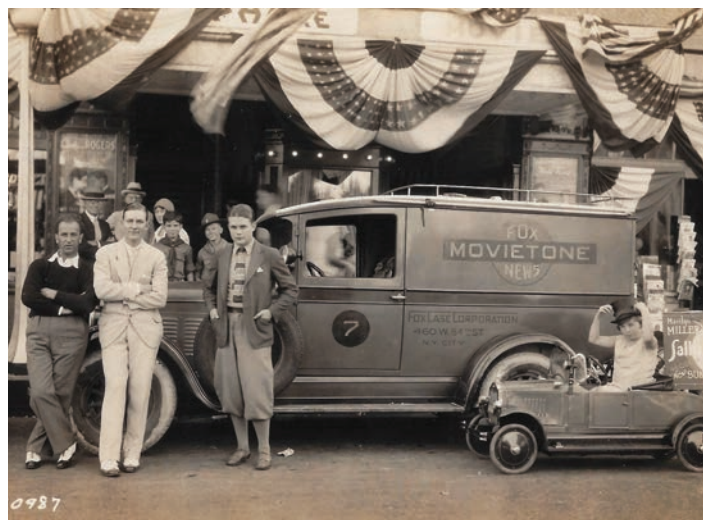
Typical of the exuberance is this 1925 report from Koblegard to the *Fort Pierce News-Tribune* after Koblegard had returned from an extended visit up north: "Mr. Koblegard reports that the principle topic for conversation among the northerners is Florida and its boom. A goodly number of persons are leaving their homes in the north every day and are heading for Florida, Mr. Koblegard reports." >>



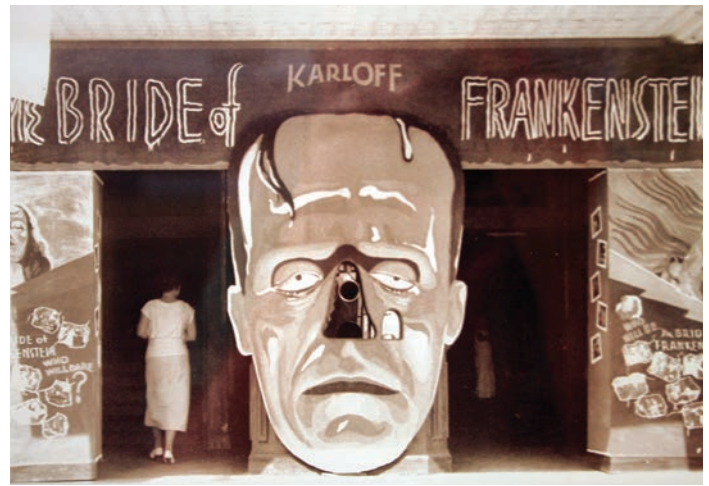
R.N. 'Pop' Koblegard's Sunrise Theatre building as it appeared in the 1920s.



R.N. 'Pop' Koblegard built a house, complete with flower boxes and an artificial lawn, on top of the Sunrise Theatre, which the family called The Roost.



Rupert Koblegard Jr., son of R.N. 'Pop' Koblegard, took over management of the Sunrise Theatre in 1928 and ran it until 1946. He is shown here in a white suit shortly after sound movies came to the Sunrise and the Movietone system of sound was introduced at the theater.



A.E. 'Bean' Backus, who would become the dean of Florida landscape painters, was the house artist at the Sunrise Theatre from 1930 to 1938, creating sets at the theater entrance for movies such as *The Bride of Frankenstein* and *Tarzan*.

But the exuberance wouldn't last through the decade, and Koblegard's dreams for Fort Pierce Farms were never fulfilled. Hurricanes in 1926 and 1928 made Florida less appealing and the stock market crash of 1929 ended the boom entirely.

During the next decades, Koblegard and his wife would live in homes they built or bought in St. Lucie Village, South Indian River Drive, Colonial Road and downtown Fort Pierce, among other places. Koblegard also had a house built atop the Sunrise Theatre, complete with flower boxes and an artificial lawn. It became known as The Roost, and was the place Koblegard and Rose May always returned between moves.

"They were constantly selling and buying places," said Wendy Koblegard Bishop, another Koblegard granddaughter and younger sister of Mary Ann Bryan. "It was all to do with real estate. They did a lot of moving back and forth."

From The Roost, Koblegard was master of almost all that he surveyed. He had a close-up view of the many properties he owned downtown; to the east he could see South Beach, where he had properties; and to the north beyond view was Fort Pierce Farms. "We loved to go up there because we had such a beautiful view of the town and the river," Bryan said.

BACKUS ON BOARD

With land deals cooling in the 1930s, Koblegard made the Sunrise more of a focus and saw the potential of building a theater empire. While overall attendance at movie theaters dropped during the Depression, theaters were becoming a refuge for people hoping to forget their worries, with 65 percent of Americans attending movies once a week during the Depression. Attendance was also helped by a drop in admission price, from an average of 30 cents in 1930 to 20 cents in 1933.

In 1929, Koblegard began leasing The It, whose name had returned to Ritz, and continued holding a lease on it through 1955.

At the Sunrise, Backus, who had been occasionally decorating front entrances to the theater during the 1920s, was hired full time as staff artist, ticket-taker and usher from 1930 to 1938.

Koblegard had begun giving Backus work while he was a junior in high school, when he hired him in 1923 to paint a bird's eye view of Koblegard's developments, including one called Pinewood, according to *A. E. Backus Florida Artist*, Olive Peterson's biography of Backus. "They couldn't use aerials because there was nothing to photograph," Backus told Peterson. "I painted buildings and landscaping in the

plans to make them look pretty."

As the Sunrise's house artist, Backus was given a studio on the second floor of the building, where he would create large sets to lure people into the theater. These included a monster head for *The Bride of Frankenstein*, a jungle scene for *Tarzan* and a forest for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

Live acts in the theater's early years included cowboy Tom Mix and fan dancer Sally Rand, who liked Backus' portrait so much that she took it on tour with her. Backus told Peterson that he and other Sunrise employees received a percentage of profits based on attendance at the theater.

Operating in the days of the Jim Crow South when some theaters did not admit black patrons, the Sunrise had two entrances. A separate box office was at the back of the theater, where black theatergoers climbed stairs outside to enter and watch shows from the balcony.

Bryan did not know the origin of the separate entrance, but she said the balcony was part of the theater's original construction. Newspaper accounts also could not be found detailing the separate entrance and use of the balcony.

In any case, it was likely, that as a businessman Koblegard wanted as many customers as possible, regardless of race. Backus, who defied racial barriers and was known for distancing himself from people who held racist views, always expressed great affection for Koblegard.

DOUBLING DOWN ON THEATERS

In 1930, Koblegard formed a partnership with M.C. Talley, Frank Rogers and B.B. Garner. The partnership became affiliated with Florida State Theaters, a subsidiary of Paramount Pictures, and began a buying or building spree of a dozen theaters or drive-ins.

In 1936, the partnership purchased the building and real estate of the Florida Theatre in Vero Beach; in 1937 it purchased the State Theatre in Cocoa and leased the Lyric Theatre in Stuart and the Van Cross Theatre in Melbourne; and in 1940 it purchased the Lyric, while also installing concession stands in all the theaters.

Bryan remembers working the concession stand on Saturdays and Sundays at the Sunrise while in the seventh and eighth grades. "It was very small with just a popcorn machine," she said. "No soft drinks were served. Just popcorn and candy."

Koblegard's partnership purchased 50 percent of the Fort >>



Four generations of Koblewards gathered for this family portrait on Thanksgiving in 1955 at R.N. 'Pop' and Rose May's home on Colonial Road, later the home of Realtor Hoyt C. Murphy. The men in the back row are Ruhl W. 'Sonny' Kobleward Jr., Sinclair Harcus, Rupert Kobleward Jr., Rupert 'Koby' Kobleward III, and Pop Kobleward. From left in the middle row are Mary Ann Kobleward [Bryan], Frances 'Sissy' Kobleward Harcus and son Sinclair Harcus Jr., Rose May Kobleward, Mary Kobleward, Marjory Kobleward, Christine Kobleward, Hazel Kobleward, and Laura Lee Kobleward. The two children sitting on the floor are Ruhl W. 'Chip' Kobleward III and Wendell May [Wendy] Kobleward.

Pierce Drive-In in late 1949; in 1950 it purchased the Vero Beach Drive-In; in 1951 it constructed the Brevard Drive-In in Eau Gallie and the Cocoa Drive-In in Cocoa; and in 1953 built the Stuart Drive-In and opened the Melbourne Drive-In.

During the war years, with as many as 40,000 troops training for what would become the invasion of Normandy at the Army base established on Fort Pierce's South Beach, the town continued to support the Kobleward partnership's two theaters, the Sunrise and Ritz. The Sunrise even had to discontinue showing double features on weekends because "both theaters [have] been inadequate to accommodate both civilians and members of the armed services on double feature programs." Having single features would enable the theaters to get more patrons into the theaters.

Besides the Sunrise and the Ritz, Fort Pierce had another theater, the Lincoln, located on Avenue D in the heart of the African American community. The theater, which opened in 1946 and closed in the late 1960s, was one of only a handful of American theaters at the time with a black owner, physician Clem C. Benton. The building was co-owned by Harry Center, a white pharmacist.

OTHER MEDIA INTERESTS

Kobleward expanded into radio in 1946 and, along with his brother, Thorne, and Doug Silver, formed Indian River Broadcasting, creating Fort Pierce's first radio station, WIRA.

Also that year, Kobleward's son, Rupert Jr., resigned as manager of the Sunrise to focus on the family's real estate



The Whizateria was a storefront fixture at the Sunrise Theatre from 1923 to 1953, operating variously as a confectionary and smoke shop and restaurant. Here it appears about 1950 after the theater's new lighted marquee was installed and air-conditioning was introduced.

business. For years, he had been balancing selling real estate with his theater duties.

Brother Ruhl ran Kobleward Insurance and oversaw the family's citrus groves.

Rupert Jr. and Pop's grandson, Ruhl W. "Sonny" Kobleward, would also be part of a consortium that launched Fort Pierce's first television station, WTVX Channel 34, in 1965.

Over the years, various retail businesses operated in the >>

Sunrise storefronts owned by Koblegard, including the family's real estate and insurance businesses, and the popular Whizateria, which variously operated as a soda, tobacco and confectionary shop and restaurant from 1923 to 1953.

The theater underwent several remodels over the years, the biggest change being in 1948, when a new triangular light-up marquee was installed. The new marquee, which had removable steel letters, enabled the theater to easily advertise the names of shows and the actors appearing in them. Air-conditioning was installed in the theater in 1950.

In 1955, Koblegard sold the operation of the theaters to First Southeast Corp. and in 1960 the operation of the Sunrise and Ritz was part of a deal sold to Kent Enterprises Inc., headed by Jacksonville lawyer and theater operator Fred H. Kent. None of the sales involved the Sunrise Theatre property, which remained owned by Koblegard.

BENEFITS OF OWNERSHIP

Though Koblegard had management companies run the Sunrise during most of the years of his ownership, his arrangements always stipulated that Koblegard family members be let into the theater for free.

Bryan's husband, retired Circuit Judge Ben L. "Buck" Bryan Jr., remembers taking Mary Ann on dates to the Sunrise and paying full price for himself and Mary Ann until her father asked him, "Why are you buying tickets?" and I thought, I always bought tickets. I didn't know I didn't have to pay for her and I might even get in for free."

Mary Ann Bryan said one of the biggest events she remembers at the Sunrise was Jerome Courtland's appearance in 1951 for the showing of *Barefoot Mailman* in which he starred.



Fans flocked to see *Barefoot Mailman* star Jerome Courtland when he appeared at the Sunrise Theatre in 1951. Wendy Koblegard, left, and Mary Ann Koblegard, right, got to meet Courtland closeup.

The movie was based on Theodore Pratt's book of the same name about mail carriers who walked Florida's east coast beaches during the early days of postal delivery.

Bryan's sister, Wendy Koblegard Bishop, remembers Saturday matinees and seeing cowboy movies with Roy Rogers, Gene Autrey and the Lone Ranger. "For 25 cents I could get a popcorn, Coke and candy," she said. "My favorite was Junior Mints, and still is."

One of her most vivid memories was the appearance of heartthrob and singer Bobby Rydell in 1960. >>

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PORFIRIO SOLORIZANO | INDIAN RIVER MAGAZINE

The Sunrise Theatre auditorium and balcony as it appeared after the theater underwent an \$11 million restoration and reopened in 2006.

Bishop said her grandparents often took care of her and her siblings on fall weekends, when her parents were away for football games. She said her grandmother, Rose May, loved soap operas and afternoon tours around town by their driver, Wilbur Silas.

She remembers visiting her grandfather in his office on the first floor of the Sunrise building. While he often wore suits in his younger, more serious days, in his later years he was always seen wearing Bermuda shorts making his daily appointed rounds.

“When he would leave the office he would always walk down the street and go into the stores of the buildings he owned,” Bishop said.

Rose May died in 1959 at the age of 81 after an apparent stroke. Pop died in 1964 a month after he had a fall during Hurricane Cleo. Ruhl W. Koblebard Sr. had died in 1952 and son Rupert Jr. died in 1972. Four of Pop and Rose May’s grandchildren survive today: Frances Harcus of Lexington, Virginia, daughter of Ruhl W. Sr.; and Bryan and Bishop and their sister, Laura Hayes of Homosassa, daughters of Rupert Jr. Their brother, Rupert [Koby] Koblebard III, died in November. Ruhl Sr.’s son, Ruhl W. “Sonny” Koblebard Jr. of Fort Pierce, died in 2003.

WHITHER THE THEATRE?

With dwindling attendance caused by the ascendancy of television and the arrival of a new theater in what is now called Sabal Palm Plaza, Kent Theatres closed the Sunrise in 1983, with the lease reverting back to Rupert Koblebard’s descendants.

The building remained vacant for more than two decades.



GREGORY ENNS

Sisters Wendy Koblebard Bishop, left, and Mary Ann Koblebard Bryan were featured on a panel celebrating the Sunrise Theatre’s 100th anniversary during the Treasure Coast History Festival held at the theater in January.

The St. Lucie Preservation Association, a nonprofit arm of Main Street Fort Pierce, purchased the theater portion of the building from the Koblebards in 1997 for \$50,000. The transaction essentially represented a donation from the family, since the \$50,000 was the approximate cost that had been spent to put a new roof on the building. The association then purchased the front part of the building in 1999 from the family for \$405,000.

The building underwent an \$11 million restoration begin- >>

CELEBRATE THE SUNRISE'S CENTURY

The Sunrise Theatre will celebrate its 100th anniversary with a 1920s-themed speakeasy party at 7 p.m., July 29, at the theater, 117 S. Second St., Fort Pierce. In addition to food and drinks, the evening will feature various entertainment venues such as a casino and bourbon bar and performance and instruction of the Charleston dance on the main stage. Tickets to the event, presented by the nonprofit Sunrise Theatre Foundation, are \$125 per person.

Visit www.sunrisetheatre.com for more information.



GREGORY ENNS

Since the Sunrise Theatre's reopening in 2006, hundreds of thousands of patrons have walked through the doors and past the portrait of its founder, R.N. 'Pop' Koblegard, in the main lobby. Koblegard built the Sunrise Theatre at the behest of the city council, opening it on Aug. 1, 1923.

ning in 2000 and reopened in January 2006 with sold-out performances by Dionne Warwick. Shortly after opening, Main Street Fort Pierce donated the Sunrise to the City of Fort Pierce.

Since then hundreds of thousands of people have walked through the doors of the Sunrise to see everything from high school graduations and local ballet productions to perfor-

mances by major artists such as Tony Bennett, Willie Nelson, Smokey Robinson, Olivia Newton-John, Ringo Starr, Itzhak Perlman, Diana Ross and Kris Kristofferson.

The patrons enter under the watchful gaze of a photographic portrait of Koblegard, who correctly foresaw the promise of Fort Pierce and his theater more than a century ago. *RE*

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family, which included my grandmother, out of their home on South Indian River Drive. Pop Koblegard apparently came to the rescue.

"Thanks to Mr. Koblegard we got 80 acres in the new drainage district in Fort Pierce that he and Mr. Armstrong were promoting," my great uncle, Bob Gladwin, wrote in his memoir shortly before his death in 1988. The district was Fort Pierce Farms, where R.R. successfully planted a citrus grove that would hold the family in good stead for several decades.

Back at the Sunrise, when not on Koblegard alert, Ruby was always telling us about some guy named Grayson with whom she had a direct line at the Kent Theatres headquarters in Jacksonville. According to Ruby, Grayson would send undercover operatives into the theater. Posing as regular theater patrons, they would stealthily go over operations and report their findings to Grayson, who would pass them on to Ruby. From these, Ruby would tell us of her concern of a cashier who didn't count money back to the customer or a concession worker who was drinking soda behind the counter or a slovenly usher.

I don't think any of us believed the reports but they did keep us on our toes and left us slightly paranoid, wondering whether a certain customer might be on a mission from Grayson.

Thankfully, by my senior year, I had worked my way up to the projection booth and out of sight of Grayson's operatives. I was making \$5 per hour, unheard of for a 17-year-old in 1976, when the minimum wage was \$2.30. Many projectionists belonged to a union and Kent Theatres was trying to keep the union out of their booths.

By graduation, my course with Ruby and the Sunrise ended and I took a job at Boogart's grocery store, where I got more hours and made more money before leaving for college that fall.

Looking back on it, my time with Ruby wasn't so bad. On slow nights, she would spring for pizza for the staff at Barro's, a new pizza joint in town, and the good-paying projectionist job she gave me in high school enabled me to get a projectionist job while in college.

After graduation, I came back to Fort Pierce to work as a reporter for *The News-Tribune*. Sadly, in 1983, I had to report the close of the theater I loved and grew up with before moving on to another job on Florida's west coast. I returned in 2006 to once again live in Fort Pierce, and by coincidence, it was the same year the Sunrise, after an \$11 million renovation, reopened after 23 years of being shuttered.

During that first year, the Treasure Coast Opera, which had been performing in the boxy St. Lucie County Civic Center, moved to the Sunrise. I brought my daughter, Lucie, a junior in high school, with me to one of its performances of *La Boheme*. Listening to Puccini and seeing the beauty of the opera performed in my house — the Sunrise Theatre — I realized I had made the right decision to return home and start a magazine company. As my daughter slept in the seat next to me, I wept.

I was moved at that moment, and I realized that the magic of the Sunrise, which opened exactly 100 years ago come Aug. 1, is that it has created moments like that night for thousands of other patrons. They will always associate the theater with that great memory and others, and their affection for the theater will only deepen. Happy birthday, old girl.

SHARE YOUR MEMORIES

As the 100th anniversary of the opening of the Sunrise Theatre approaches Aug. 1, share your memories of the Sunrise at <https://indianrivermagazine.com/i-remember-the-sunrise> and read other memories at <https://indianrivermagazine.com/i-remember-the-sunrise-contest-winners/>